

# ***MESOAMERICA***

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## **PANAMA**

### **Noriega To Go Free in '07**

Former Panamanian dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega is scheduled to be released on 9 Sep '07 after 17 years in a Miami Federal Prison for drug trafficking, conspiracy and money laundering.

Noriega, now 70, has been held in a US federal correction facility in southern Florida since '90. In Dec '89, US troops invaded Panama and detained Noriega, transferring him to Florida where a federal court declared him guilty of several crimes and sentenced him to 40 years in prison (Vol. 9, No. 1). In '99, his sentence was reduced for good behavior and, on 8 Jan, Frank Rubino, Noriega's lawyer, announced he would be released on 9 Sep of this year.

According to Rubino, Noriega would like to return to Panama as soon as possible to "enjoy his home, his family and his retirement." However, it is very possible that he would be arrested upon his arrival. Panama has been trying to extradite the former General, who is wanted for crimes committed in Panama between '68 and '89 such as torture, disappearances and the Albrook Massacre, which could land him another 40-year term in a Panamanian prison. According to the Geneva War Crimes Convention, Noriega will not be deported to Panama and in fact has the right to choose a third country for residence, which would grant him protection.

Noriega and Rubino seem to think that he has paid his debt to society with his 17 years in the US prison, and that Panamanian officials have no grounds on which to charge him further.

### **Contraband Found During Prison Raids**

A surprise inspection at La Joyita penitentiary led to the discovery of 80 knives and 57 cell phones, along with drugs, cameras, chisels, jewelry, prepaid phone cards and batteries. Furthermore, the investigating team found, and later resealed, six escape tunnels that the inmates had constructed leading to a nearby town, Paso Blanco.

Two-hundred agents participated in the investigation, along with police dogs, the department of transportation and the information and investigative police unit. Similar investigations are being planned throughout the nation's prison system.

In reaction to the discoveries at La Joyita, the Panamanian penitentiary system has reinforced its security measures in an attempt to cut down on escapes and to improve the overall control on the inmates. Several police officials are being investigated for association with, or knowledge linking them to, escaped prisoners in '06. During '06, 62 prisoners escaped, more than double the number reported in '05. The smuggling of food, water, drugs, cell phones and other goods into the prisons has become a common business among guards and other prison personnel.

### **Kuna Indians Denounce Drug Trafficking**

The Kuna, a Panamanian Indigenous people who reside in the archipelago of Kuna Kala on the northeastern Caribbean Coast of Panama, have filed complaints with drug prosecutors in Panama City denouncing the activities of Colombian narco-traffickers who are using their waters to traffic and store cocaine, which is threatening the lives and social stability of their people.

The archipelago of Kuna Kala borders the province of Darién in eastern Panama, which is located next to the border of Panama and Colombia and is one of the most dangerous provinces due to narco-traffickers and the spillover of Colombian rightwing paramilitaries and leftist revolutionary forces (Vol. 21, No. 9).

The Kuna Indigenous people traditionally live in agricultural communities that fish, hunt and create artisan handcrafts with patterns based on nature. But their ancient customs have been altered recently due to the large amount of cocaine that is being transported throughout the area and stored so that faster speedboats can pick it up later for a journey north, turning the islands into a drug transit point.

The cocaine entering the Kuna region is finding its way into the hands of the community's youth as well as into the pockets of others. Last year an unknown commander of a narco-trafficking gang seeking revenge arrived on the islands of Kuna Kala in search of persons responsible for the disappearance of a cocaine stash. Furthermore, a Kuna legislator was accused by his own people of using stolen drug money to buy a house in Panama City, an accusation that he quickly denied.

### **Colombia Places Restrictions on Colón Free Trade Zone Imports**

On 26 Jan, Panama received a surprising announcement from the Colombian government stating that it will reinstall trade restrictions on goods imported from the Colón Free Trade Zone (CFTZ) in Panama, starting on 1 Mar. Colombia announced that their decision was based on the excessive amount of contraband entering their country from the CFTZ.

The problem seems to be that goods leaving the CFTZ for Colombia are not being properly documented by Panamanian Customs officials. Receipts, prices and customs declaration forms are being altered; often receipts are being turned in from companies that do not even exist in the CFTZ. This is hurting the Colombian market because the smuggled goods arriving from Panama are not being taxed upon entry into Colombia.

The surprise announcement reportedly came as quite a shock to the Panamanian government, which claimed that it had received no previous complaints about contraband entering Colombia from the CFTZ. To avoid situations like this, in Nov '06 the two governments signed a Protocol for the Cooperation and Exchange of Information in Customs, in which they agreed on periodic meetings to keep each other informed on customs issues. However, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe stated that there will be a diplomatic dialogue with Panamanian authorities on the subject.

The new restrictions establish that all clothing, textiles and shoes imported from Panama may only enter Colombia through customs houses in Bogotá, the nation's capital, or through the Caribbean port of Barranquilla. This restriction raises the price of clothing available in Colombia by 80% and of footwear by 133%.

—*Stephanie Luckam*